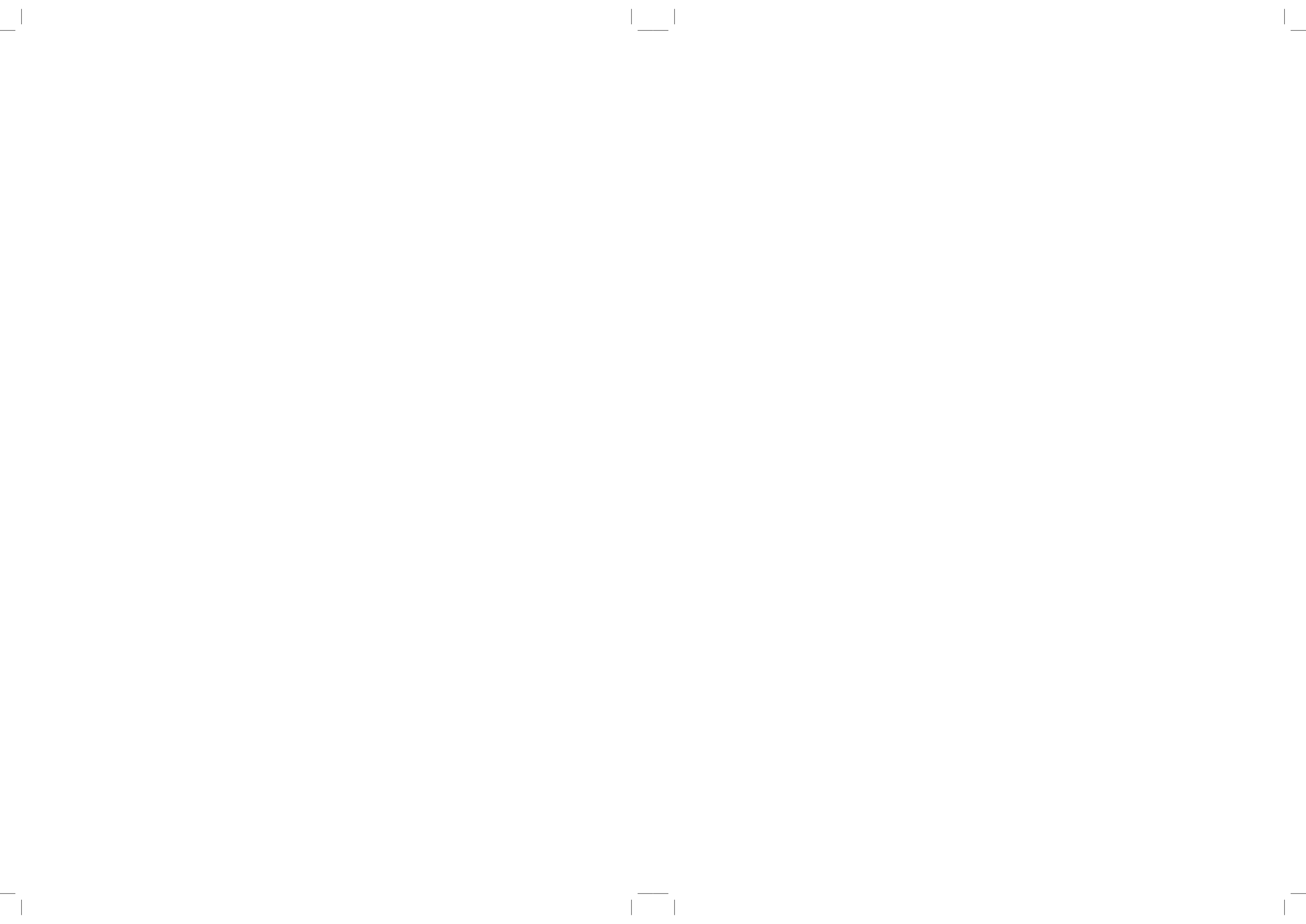


Executive Summary: Report on the Quality of Pre-school Services

Analysis of Pre-school inspection reports





Executive Summary:
**Report on the Quality
of Pre-school Services**
**Analysis of pre-school
inspection reports**

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September 2014

This report has been prepared by **Dr. Sinéad Hanafin** of **Research Matters Ltd.** on behalf of Tusla, Child and Family Agency.



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4. There is currently no mechanism in place for **taking account of the views of parents or children** in the annual inspection process. Some consideration may need to be given to incorporating their views and to mechanisms for facilitating this.
5. The **higher levels of non-compliance** in respect of drop-in services, regional variation and follow-up inspections require further and more in-depth examination.
6. Some consideration needs to be given to **extending the breadth and range of sanctions** that can be applied where a service is found to be non-compliant so that the level of non-compliance on follow-up inspections can be reduced.
7. There is a need for **improvements in the information technology system** underpinning the inspection process.
8. A more comprehensive analysis could have taken place had **additional information** been provided in the inspection reports on, for example:
 - the context of the service (e.g. location within community, type of premises, etc);
 - the level of education of the service provider in the area of early childhood care and education;
 - the profit/not-for-profit status of the service;
 - whether there had been previous complaints about the service.

Consideration should be given to the inclusion of these areas in the Inspection Report Form.

9. The collation of reports was hampered by **the absence of a central repository and an appropriate ICT system**. Consideration needs to be given to such a development as a matter of urgency.

Regulation 14 is focused on records that the service is required to have and make available for inspection, by inspectors as well as by parents. The non-compliance commentary reflected almost all sub-sections of this regulation, which, as noted earlier, includes 5 sections and a further 13 sub-sections. The main issues arising related to the absence of key records in respect of the service (e.g. details about the facility), the staff (e.g. qualifications of staff members, staff rotas, details of the staff–child ratio) and the children (e.g. arrival and departure times).

The volume of information set out in the regulations that providers are required to record is very considerable and it is not surprising that this area had a high level of non-compliance. Issues relating to safety matters, many of which were specific to children’s safety, as well as those relating to management and staffing (particularly on Garda vetting and staff–child ratios) are a cause for concern and some consideration may need to be given to how these can be addressed at a more systemic level.

ICT systems, including a central repository

The absence of a central repository for reports led to significant challenges in accessing and managing the data emerging from the reports. Immediate consideration needs to be given to the development and implementation of a comprehensive ICT system that can support the generation and collation of reports; make the information accessible for analysis; and allow for rapid retrieval of individual reports. In the absence of such a system, access to information about pre-school inspections will continue to be problematic.

8. Areas for consideration

There are a number of issues emerging from this report that need to be considered in light of the findings identified. These are:

1. The number of regulations, with their various sections and sub-sections, provide an extensive framework for examining all aspects of pre-school services. While this is very helpful in identifying areas for assessment, it does mean that the potential for non-compliance is very high across multiple regulations. Some consideration may need to be given to how differentiation in respect of compliance and non-compliance takes place. One approach that might be considered is to base the overall assessment of whether the service is compliant or non-compliant on the **4 broad thematic areas** identified in this study, namely:
 - Is the service safe?
 - Does the service support the health, welfare and development of children in its care?
 - Is the service well governed?
 - Are the premises and facilities structurally sound and fit for purpose?
2. There is an urgent need to address the issues relating to **Garda vetting, children’s safety** and the **volume, content and extent of the records required**. These issues require a systematic response from organisations that provide support for services.
3. It may be helpful to consider an **information campaign for service providers and parents**, with a small number of key messages to draw attention to specific areas of non-compliance and their recognition.

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Foreword



Ireland's strong commitment to supporting children and young people is reflected in the investment it has made in a new State agency dedicated to improving well-being and outcomes for children. Tusla, the Child and Family Agency, which was formed on 1st January 2014, represents the most comprehensive reform of child protection, early intervention and family support services ever undertaken in Ireland. It is an ambitious move, which brings together some 4,000 staff and an operational budget of approximately €609 million.

As Chief Executive of this Agency, I am acutely aware of the overwhelming evidence that investment in early childhood care and education produces lasting benefits across a range of outcomes.

I commissioned this analysis of inspection reports spanning 17 months to determine the key learning areas for strategic attention. The benefits of this learning will accrue for children, communities and society at large, and they are important for each one of us.

We know from the *Growing Up in Ireland* study that at 9 months, just under 40% of infants were in regular non-parental childcare. Provision has also been made for each child in Ireland under the Early Childhood Care and Education Programme to avail of one year of free access to early years learning. The regulation of this area is, therefore, critically important to make sure that good quality services are consistently provided to children in their formative years of development.

I welcome the findings of this *Report on the Quality of Pre-school Services: Analysis of pre-school inspection reports*. They have implications for everybody – for Tusla, for the Early Years Inspectors, for childcare providers, but most of all for the children availing of these services. Significantly, they confirm the importance of ongoing investment in the areas of education, training and other supports for early years services. The findings also identify where improvements must be made, particularly with regard to the regulation of compliance. The learning is currently informing our practice development and it is anticipated that it will lead to a sufficiently enhanced service provision and better outcomes for children.

Early years care and education can have specific economic benefits and have the potential to play a key role in the overall education of Ireland's children. It is a common good that should be cherished and developed as Ireland pursues its aspiration to world-class childhood for all.

Finally, I wish to thank Dr. Sinéad Hanafin, Research Matters Ltd., author of this report, for her excellent work. This report represents an important contribution to the development of best practice and enhanced service provision for young children in their formative years.



Gordon Jeyes
Chief Executive
Tusla, Child and Family Agency

most likely to be identified as compliant (75.5%), while those assessed in a follow-up inspection are least likely to be recorded as compliant (54.8%). Almost 70% of regulations (69.1%) assessed during initial inspections are found to be compliant. A similar pattern is reflected in respect of non-compliance, where 1 in 5 regulations (21.1%) in follow-up assessments are identified as non-compliant, compared with 13.1% in annual inspections. The findings do suggest, however, that in some cases actions required following an assessment of non-compliance are not carried out in all cases and this is an issue that may need some consideration.

There were also differences recorded in the level of compliance of services according to the type of service. Drop-in services were identified as being more likely than other types of service to be assessed as non-compliant. While the number of drop-in services was small, it does, nevertheless, raise some questions about the extent to which they do not comply with the regulations.

The HSE is divided into 4 regions and substantial differences were identified in the status of regulations in this category. The percentage of regulations assessed as compliant in the HSE Dublin North East Region was considerably lower (52.95%; n=6,819) than that of other regions, while the HSE West reported the highest levels of compliance (82.3%; n=22,649). The HSE South (74.25%; n=14,614) and Dublin Mid-Leinster (75.19%; n=15,450) were similar to each other in their pattern of compliance. The findings in respect of non-compliance with regulations shows a similar pattern, with almost 1 in 4 regulations (23.2%) in reports from the HSE Dublin North East Region being assessed as non-compliant, compared with less than 10% in the HSE West (9.4%; n=2,580). While it is not clear why these differences emerge, consideration needs to be given to whether the differences reflect variation in the services themselves or to how the inspections are conducted and compliance or non-compliance assessed. This is an area that requires further exploration.

Pre-school services are most likely to be assessed as non-compliant in areas relating to management and staffing, safety measures and records

The areas with the highest levels of non-compliance were management and staffing (*Regulation 8*), safety measures (*Regulation 27*) and records (*Regulation 14*). *Regulation 8* has 3 sub-sections, focusing variously on the staff-child ratio, the designated person and appropriate vetting of all staff prior to their being appointed (including Garda vetting and having references). All of these issues emerged in the thematic analysis on non-compliance and it is not possible to identify which specific area (or how many areas) resulted in the assessment of non-compliance. It could be due to an incorrect staff-child ratio, the absence of a designated person or appropriate vetting procedures not having taken place. It may be due to one or two areas or all three. The volume of non-compliance information generated in respect of Garda vetting not being in place for all staff, however, was more extensive than that relating to the other two areas, and while all three issues are important, it is clear that non-compliance in this area could have substantial implications for the care of children.

Contrary to the consistency of the information emerging under *Regulation 8*, there were a vast number of issues arising under *Regulation 27*, which deals with safety measures. These are discussed in greater detail later, but in summary, they included structural issues relating to hazards, garden or outdoor play areas, temperature control (particularly in respect of radiators and hot water) and many different issues to do with the processes in place to protect children, prevent the spread of infection, ensure they are appropriately supervised (including when they are at rest or asleep) and unsafe storage of materials and equipment. A long list of hazards was identified under this regulation (*see Box 1 in Chapter 5*). Similar to *Regulation 5*, a number of issues of relevance to this area were also documented under other regulations and sometimes the same information was provided in respect of both.

high numbers of regulations (more than 11) is very low – less than 200 (6.5% of the total sample).

This is a positive finding in terms of the overall operation of pre-school services and suggests that most services are operating at an acceptable level across most areas relevant to the pre-school regulations.

Regulations with low levels of non-compliance have requirements that are relatively straightforward for providers to meet, while those with high levels of non-compliance are generally more complex

The level of non-compliance in respect of individual services varied from less than 1% (*Regulation 10*, Notice to HSE: 0.7%; *Regulation 12*, Number who can be catered for: 0.7%; *Regulation 23*, Drainage and sewage disposal: 0.8%) to more than 40% (*Regulation 8*, Management and staffing: 46%; *Regulation 27*, Safety measures: 43%; *Regulation 14*, Records: 35%). In addition to Regulations 8, 27 and 14, there were other areas, mainly to do with the premises and facilities, that had relatively high levels of non-compliance. These were *Regulation 18* (Premises and facilities), *Regulation 22* (Sanitary accommodation) and *Regulation 13* (Register of pre-school children), all of which were found to be non-compliant in more than 20% of reports.

The findings provide support for the contention that regulations with low levels of non-compliance have requirements that are relatively straightforward for providers to meet, while those with high levels of non-compliance are more multifaceted and require more complex remedies.

In general, issues arising under each thematic area directly reflect the text of childcare regulations

It is clear from the issues arising that there is a close relationship between the focus of the inspection and the text of the regulations, and, in general, reporting reflects the content and wording of individual regulations. This is particularly obvious in respect of regulations dealing with fire safety, records, management and staffing, medical assistance and first aid, and the physical structure of the service (including waste, draining, lighting, ventilation and heating). There are a small number of regulations, however, where the relationship is less clear and, in general, this reflects the complexity of the area. *Regulation 5* is particularly problematic in this regard and while there is consistency in how it is reported, the extensiveness of the information presented means that there are multiple issues arising under this regulation that are also relevant to other regulations. In summary, reports on inspections reflect the regulations themselves and there is clear evidence that inspectors closely align their findings with the regulations themselves.

There are differences in the level of compliance and non-compliance according to the type of inspection conducted, the type of service provided and the geographic region where the service is conducted

There are three main types of inspections carried out – (1) annual inspections (accounting for 87% of reports), which are considered routine in nature; (2) initial inspections (accounting for 7.2% of reports), which are carried out at the inception of the service; and (3) follow-up inspections (accounting for 4.9% of reports), which, as the title suggests, take place for the purpose of assessing an issue previously identified as problematic. While the numbers of inspections in each type differ considerably, the findings are nevertheless in line with what would be expected. Regulations assessed in the course of an annual/routine inspection are

1. Introduction

Under the Child Care (Pre-School Services) Regulations 2006, the Health Service Executive (HSE) is responsible for inspecting the quality of services in pre-schools, play groups, nurseries, crèches, day-care and similar services that cater for children aged 0-6 not attending a Primary school or similar structure. The inspections are carried out by Pre-School Inspectors who are professionals with expertise in children’s development and environmental health. There are 33 regulations, set out under 6 parts, and 27 of these (from Regulation 5 to Regulation 31) are inspected by Pre-School Inspectors.¹ Under Section 32 of the regulations, the HSE must furnish a report in writing to the person carrying on the pre-school service. These pre-school inspection reports are the subject of this analysis and review, which was commissioned by the HSE in June 2013.

2. Purpose of the inspection process

The purpose of the inspection process is to assess overall quality of the service through making judgements about compliance in respect of the pre-school regulations. These judgements are documented in the pre-school inspection report. The quantitative findings are presented in this report under each of the 27 regulations under which services are examined (*see Table 1*).

Table 1: Number and short title of individual pre-school regulations

| Regulation No. | Title (short) |
|----------------|---|
| 5 | Health, welfare and development of the child |
| 6 | First aid |
| 7 | Medical assistance |
| 8 | Management and staffing |
| 9 | Behaviour management |
| 10 | Notice to be given by person proposing to carry on pre-school service |
| 11 | Notification of change in circumstances |
| 12 | Number of pre-school children who may be catered for |
| 13 | Register of pre-school children |
| 14 | Records |
| 15 | Information for parents |
| 16 | Fire safety measures |
| 17 | Copy of Act and Regulations |
| 18 | Premises and facilities |
| 19 | Heating |
| 20 | Ventilation |
| 21 | Lighting |
| 22 | Sanitary accommodation |

continued

¹ The full text of the *Child Care (Pre-School Services) Regulations 2006* is available at: http://www.dcyh.gov.ie/documents/publications/Child_Care_Pre-School_Services_Regs_2006.pdf

| Regulation No. | Title (short) |
|----------------|--------------------------------------|
| 23 | Drainage and sewage disposal |
| 24 | Waste storage and disposal |
| 25 | Equipment and materials |
| 26 | Food and drink |
| 27 | Safety measures |
| 28 | Facilities for rest and play |
| 29 | Furnishing of information to the HSE |
| 30 | Insurance |
| 31 | Annual fees |

3. Methodology

The aim of this study was to conduct an analysis of reports on pre-school inspections carried out over a period of 17 months, from January 2012 to May 2013. The specific objectives were:

1. to describe the extent to which pre-school services overall are in compliance with the regulations;
2. to quantify individual areas where compliance/non-compliance with the regulations has been found by Pre-School Inspectors;
3. to identify key issues arising in respect of non-compliance;
4. to provide an overall description of the reporting process by the Pre-School Inspectorate;
5. to describe differences, commonalities and consistencies in the reporting process;
6. to assess the threshold of evidence being applied in the reports;
7. to present a written report outlining key findings.

These objectives are met through two separate reports. The present report focuses on Objectives 1, 2 and 3 and presents a quantitative and qualitative analysis of the findings presented in the pre-school inspection reports. The second report (entitled *Report on the Process of Pre-school Inspection Practices*) deals with Objectives 4, 5 and 6 and focuses on the technical process of inspections.

At the time this report was commissioned, there were 44 Pre-School Inspectors (37.8 whole time equivalents) operating nationally and completed inspection reports were held by individual inspectors at their local health office. In June 2013, the National Pre-school Office contacted each individual local health office and asked them to submit reports completed between January 2012 and May 2013. The absence of a central repository, along with staff vacancies and leave, resulted in the process of collating reports for inclusion in the analysis being both time-consuming and complex. All reports submitted prior to 31st August 2013 (n=3,007) have been included in the analysis. A comparison between the numbers of inspections conducted over the same period of time suggests that reports on approximately 80% of inspections carried out between January 2012 and May 2013 have been included in the analysis. Ethical considerations relating to anonymity and good practices in data protection have been addressed.

Both quantitative and qualitative analyses were conducted. Just over 3,000 reports (n=3,007) were included in the overall analysis and a descriptive analysis, using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS), Version 20, was carried out on key quantitative variables. In addition to the quantitative analysis, a random sample of 500

While most services are compliant with most regulations, some reports contained observations and information that raise deep concerns. There were several instances of personnel working in pre-school settings who had not been Garda vetted despite a clear requirement for this to take place. A number of immediate safety issues arose, including, for example, children having access to sharp knives, cord blinds, matches and toxic materials, as well as children being left unsupervised. There was a surprisingly high number of comments about children being given food that was lacking in nutrition and a small number of comments highlighting specific instances of children being hungry. Other comments related to premises being damp, in poor physical condition, rodent-infested and malodorous, and there were many references to toys, materials and furnishings being dirty. Although most commentary about heating related to the risk of children being burnt, there were several comments noting that the playroom or other areas (particularly toilets, lobby, hallway) were too cold and these comments were generally supported by a record of the temperature taken on the day of inspection. One report noted the children had to keep their coats on because it was so cold. Some disturbing comments, also emerged in respect of the care of children and in a small number of instances, the inspector described observations of staff being disengaged from the children, behaviour inappropriately managed and children not adequately cared for in a way that met their individual needs. Finally, a small number of services did not have insurance or sufficient insurance for the number of children in their care. Given that the pre-school services were under inspection at the time these incidents were observed, it is clear there are some poor practices taking place, albeit in a small number of settings.

The pre-school regulations identify more than 100 areas of pre-school provision to be assessed and this places an onerous responsibility on both providers and inspectors

Pre-school inspections are based on the legislative framework and explanatory guide to requirements for pre-school provision, which are presented in the *Child Care (Pre-School Services) Regulations 2006* (S.I. No. 604 of 2006). This legislation identifies some 33 regulations across 6 parts and Pre-School Inspectors focus on 27 of these regulations. Across these 27 regulations, there are 21 sub-clauses and 76 sub-sections, giving a total of 124 potential areas for inspection. Each of these areas provides a focus for examination and while the overall regulations are sufficiently broad to allow the inspectors to use their professional judgement in assessing compliance and non-compliance, the large number of named issues identified across regulations does give rise to a need to assess each of these areas.

Consequently, some regulations can create an onerous responsibility on service providers to ensure that they meet individual requirements, as well as on the inspectors to ensure that the requirements are met.

Most pre-school services are compliant with most regulations

The findings of this study show that most pre-school services are compliant with most regulations and about three-quarters of all regulatory requirements inspected are assessed as compliant. However, the extensiveness of the regulations and their diversity is evident in the findings in respect of compliance according to individual services. Almost three-quarters of regulations (74%; n=60,079) are assessed as compliant and just under 14% (13.7%; n=11,156) are assessed as non-compliant. The remainder were reported by inspectors as not applicable, not assessed or were not classified. Overall, however, less than 1 in 4 services (23.6%; n=724) were reported to have no elements of the regulations assessed as non-compliant. The number of regulations with which individual services were non-compliant ranged from none to 20, with a mean of 3.7. A wide standard deviation, however, confirms the substantial variation that exists across services. The number of reports recording non-compliance with

- policies and procedures in place;
- information about the service as required by the relevant authority.

These areas are mainly covered under 8 regulations (Regulations 8, 10, 11, 13, 14, 15, 29 and 31), although issues relating to having specific policies and procedures in place are relevant to several different regulations.

Issues arising in respect of the **management and staffing** of services are closely linked with, and reflect, the text of *Regulation 8* and, as noted earlier, this regulation includes information on the staff–child ratio, Garda vetting and references, as well as training of staff and the presence of a designated person. The extent of the commentary under each of these areas varied considerably: a surprisingly large number of comments were made in respect of Garda vetting, while only a small number emerged in respect of training of staff, although the actions identified under this area suggest a need for some support.

There are an extensive number of different **records** to be held by individual services and the content of these are, for the most part, laid down in individual regulations (mainly Regulations 13, 14 and 15). In general, the commentary arising reflects commonly promoted good practice in record-keeping, including availability, comprehensiveness, accuracy, keeping records up-to-date and storage of information. There are also an extensive number of **policy and procedures** required under individual regulations and some generated substantial commentary. In terms of governance, there were 3 key issues – the availability, content and, to a lesser extent, the implementation of the policy.

The final area emerging under governance is focused on the provision of **information**/fees to the HSE and this is explicitly dealt with under Regulations 10, 11, 29 and 31. This area generated very little commentary and almost all services were compliant across these areas.

4. Are the premises and facilities structurally sound and fit for purpose?

The final thematic area refers to the extent to which the physical structure of the service and the facilities are fit for purpose and this area is regulated for under a number of different regulations, including premises and facilities (*Regulation 18*), space available for children (*Regulations 12 and 18*), heating (*Regulation 19*), ventilation (*Regulation 20*), lighting (*Regulation 21*), sanitary accommodation (*Regulation 22*), drainage and sewage disposal (*Regulation 23*), waste disposal (*Regulation 24*) and materials and equipment (*Regulation 25*).

Three broad sub-themes emerged in respect of this thematic area, namely: comfort of the building and facilities for children and, to a lesser extent, for adults working in the service; cleanliness; and safety.

7. Discussion and Conclusions

This section draws on the main issues arising from the findings in order to identify key messages, conclusions and areas for consideration in respect of pre-school provision as assessed under the pre-school regulations.

Some issues of deep concern were identified during the course of inspections

reports was extracted and a thematic analysis was conducted in respect of individual regulations and across regulation.

As with all secondary data sources, the information presented may not incorporate all aspects relevant to the analysis, including, in this case, information on the level of education qualifications of the service providers (which can be a strong predictor of service quality) or on whether the service was operating on a ‘for profit’ or ‘not-for-profit’ basis. The short time period available for this analysis and report has meant that potential additional data sources have not been explored. As indicated earlier, approximately 80% of reports of inspections from the period January 2012 to May 2013 are included in the analysis. Although this is a limitation, the information provided in the reports was of sufficient extent and detail to give a rich insight into the operation of the pre-school services. In addition, the number of reports lends itself to sub-analysis by various categories and the findings are, therefore, likely to be generalisable to the overall reporting process.

4. Key points from quantitative analysis

- This analysis includes 3,007 assessments of pre-school service quality as documented through pre-school inspection reports.
- Each pre-school inspection report potentially includes an assessment of 27 regulations, giving a total of 81,189 regulations.
- There are 5 possible outcomes for each regulation, namely: compliant, non-compliant, not assessed, not applicable and not found. A total of 81,189 regulations were analysed in the course of this study. The overall findings in respect of compliance across regulations show that:
 - 74% are assessed as compliant;
 - 13.7% are assessed as non-compliant;
 - 7.8% are assessed as not applicable;
 - 1.1% are not assessed;
 - 3.3% are ‘not found’, meaning do not have any indication of the compliance status.
- Regulations assessed in follow-up inspections have the highest levels of non-compliance (21.1%), while regulations assessed in annual/routine inspections have the lowest (13.1%).
- Reports on drop-in services report the lowest level of compliance (63.3%) and those on sessional and child-minding services report the highest (77.7% and 76.5% respectively).
- Reports from the HSE Dublin North East Region identify the highest levels of non-compliance (23.2%), while those from the HSE West Region report the lowest (9.3%).

5. Regulations identified in reports as having the highest levels of non-compliance

Three regulations – *Regulation 8* (Management and staffing), *Regulation 27* (Safety measures) and *Regulation 14* (Records) – were identified as having the highest level of non-compliance. These are now analysed in greater detail.

Regulation 8 (Management and staffing)

Table 2: Overall status of compliance for Regulation 8

| | Compliant | Non-compliant | Not applicable | Not assessed | Not found | Total |
|----------------|-----------|---------------|----------------|--------------|-----------|-------|
| No. of reports | 1,347 | 1,388 | 136 | 41 | 95 | 3,007 |
| % of reports | 44.8 | 46.2 | 4.5 | 1.4 | 3.2 | 100.0 |

Regulation 8 is set out in three parts. Part 1 refers to the staff–child ratio, the designated person in charge and a deputy, and the person in charge being on the premises. Part 2 refers to appropriate vetting of all staff, students and volunteers through references to past employers, reputable sources and An Garda Síochána. Part 3 refers to ensuring vetting procedures take place prior to a person being appointed or assigned.

Regulation 27 (Safety measures)

Table 3: Overall status of compliance for Regulation 27

| | Compliant | Non-compliant | Not applicable | Not assessed | Not found | Total |
|----------------|-----------|---------------|----------------|--------------|-----------|-------|
| No. of reports | 1,545 | 1,293 | 18 | 36 | 115 | 3,007 |
| % of reports | 51.4 | 43.0 | 0.6 | 1.2 | 3.8 | 100.0 |

Regulation 27 refers to the safety aspects of the pre-school service, although it should be noted that this issue also emerges in reports under several other regulations. Key issues of non-compliance related to the identification of safety hazards in the service, both internally and externally, and also to issues of process. These issues are discussed in greater detail in the next section.

Regulation 14 (Records)

Table 4: Overall status of compliance for Regulation 14

| | Compliant | Non-compliant | Not applicable | Not assessed | Not found | Total |
|----------------|-----------|---------------|----------------|--------------|-----------|-------|
| No. of reports | 1,700 | 1,053 | 138 | 17 | 99 | 3,007 |
| % of reports | 56.5 | 35.0 | 4.6 | 0.6 | 3.3 | 100.0 |

The third highest level of non-compliance was identified under Regulation 14, which refers to the records to be kept by a person carrying on a pre-school service. Key issues arising under this regulation related to the absence of key records in respect of the service (e.g. details about the facility), the staff (e.g. qualifications of staff members, staff rotas, details of the staff–child ratio) and the children (e.g. arrival and departure times).

6. Findings on service quality from thematic analysis

The thematic analysis of 500 randomly selected reports, drawn from the overall sample of 3,007, identified 4 broad thematic areas, namely: safety; health, welfare and development of children; governance; and structural soundness. Each is summarised below.

1. Is the service safe?

While safety matters are regulated for specifically under *Regulation 27*, issues relating to children’s safety emerge as an overriding concern across the entire inspection process and this reflects the overall childcare regulations. In addition to *Regulation 27*, safety concerns are identified in respect of *Regulation 6* (First aid), *Regulation 7* (Medical assistance) and *Regulation 16* (Fire safety measures), as well as specific sub-sections of various regulations, such as *Regulation 9(2)* which deals with child welfare and protection guidelines.

The main problems identified in respect of children’s safety were:

- **Structural issues**, relating to control of temperature, potential for unauthorised access by children to hazards and to the pre-school by others, first aid box, unsafe storage issues and specific hazards arising.
- **Process issues**, relating to supervision of children, dealing with medical emergencies, infection control, fire safety, child protection and insurance.

Where remedial actions were noted in reports, there were varying levels of urgency. In situations, however, where significant hazards were identified, or where children were in unsupervised situations, immediate action was generally taken or required to remedy the situation.

2. Does the service support the health, welfare and development of children in its care?

Four main sub-themes were identified from the reports:

- **The extent to which the children’s basic needs were met** (including personal care of children in areas such as toileting, rest and sleep, and personal hygiene, as well as nutrition).
- **The extent to which the physical and material environment supported children’s health, welfare and development** (incorporating the design and layout of services, the positioning of special interest areas, and the availability and accessibility of diverse, stimulating and age-appropriate toys and equipment).
- **The programme of activities being implemented** (including the extent of free play, availability and implementation of a programme of activities based on individualised needs of children, allowing children to make choices and providing opportunities for initiating and leading activities to maintain their interest).
- **Relationships around children** (including those between staff and children, between children themselves, between staff and parents, and between the service and the broader community, as well as with organisations/structures for support).

Within each of these sub-themes, there were a number of key issues arising, including the importance of caring for children and ensuring they are looked after in a healthy, respectful, engaging and positive way; that the activities they engage in support their development and that each child is encouraged to take part in activities and initiate, lead and make choices; that the service provided is appropriate to their age and developmental needs; and that the relationships around children take account of their individual needs.

3. Is the service well governed?

The question of whether a service is well governed is determined under 4 broad areas relating to:

- management and staffing;
- records maintained and made available;